2016

The Influence Of Romantic Poetry On The Career And Music Of Nicolas Medtner

Denise Rudell
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THE INFLUENCE OF ROMANTIC POETRY ON THE CAREER AND MUSIC OF NICOLAS MEDTNER

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in

Music Performance

School of Music

University of South Carolina

2016

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ABSTRACT

Nicolas Medtner was a composer born out of his time. He was a true Romantic in the Russian Silver Age and his creative ideology owes much to the Romantic poetry that he was devoted to all his life. This poetry put a decisive stamp on his music and influenced his career decisions. Medtner was exposed to the most renowned literature from an early age. Influenced by his father, and his oldest brother Emil, he developed a lifelong love for literature and especially poetry. Literary connections are apparent throughout Medtner’s music, including (and not limited to) references to Goethe, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev, Fet, Nietzsche, and Shakespeare. The influence of poetry on his personality, philosophy, and piano compositions is discussed in this document. A clearer understanding of the intrinsic connections Medtner’s music has with poetry will further aid the enjoyment of the listener and help the performer conceive an imaginative and effective interpretation of Medtner’s piano music.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF EXAMPLES ............................................................................................................... vi

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................1

  Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................................3
  Limitations of the Study .................................................................................................4
  Related Literature ...........................................................................................................4
  Methodology .....................................................................................................................6

CHAPTER II: POETRY AND MEDTNER’S PHILOSOPHY AND PERSONALITY .........7

  Background and Early Influences ...............................................................................8
  Confidence and Stubbornness .......................................................................................10
  Real World and Change in Career Path .....................................................................12
  “A Man Not of This World” ........................................................................................14
  War and Emigration .......................................................................................................17
  Poetry and Philosophy .................................................................................................20
  The Heavenly Song .......................................................................................................21
  Theme and Form ..........................................................................................................22
  Inspiration and the Muse .............................................................................................25

CHAPTER III: POETRY AND WORKS FOR SOLO PIANO ........................................29

  Romantic Poetry ..........................................................................................................32
## Table of Contents

- **“Prologue,” Op. 1, No. 1** ................................................................. 33
- **“The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1** .......................................................... 38
- **Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2; “Night Wind”** ............................ 41
- **On the Issue of Length** .................................................................. 42
- **Tyutchev’s Poem** .......................................................................... 43
- **Form and Theme** ........................................................................... 46
- **“Fairy Tales”** ................................................................................ 54
- **Tales, Op. 34, No. 2 and No. 4** .................................................... 55
- **Tale, Op. 35, No. 4** ....................................................................... 62
- **Themes of “Madness”** ................................................................. 66
- **Conclusions** ................................................................................ 67

## Bibliography

- **Books** ......................................................................................... 69
- **Articles** ...................................................................................... 69
- **Dissertations** ............................................................................... 70
- **Scores** ......................................................................................... 72
- **Web Sources** ............................................................................... 72

## Appendices

- **Appendix A: Recital Program 1** .................................................. 74
- **Appendix B: Recital Program 2** ................................................... 75
- **Appendix C: Recital Program 3** .................................................... 76
- **Appendix D: Recital Program 4** .................................................... 77
**LIST OF EXAMPLES**

<p>| Example 3.1 | “Prologue,” Op. 1, No. 1, mm. 1-9 ..................................................36 |
| Example 3.2 | “The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 13-14............................................39 |
| Example 3.3 | “The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 60-62...........................................39 |
| Example 3.4 | “The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 82-89.............................................40 |
| Example 3.5 | “The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 124-127...........................................40 |
| Example 3.6 | Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” I, m. 1 .................48 |
| Example 3.7 | Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” I, mm. 1-5..............48 |
| Example 3.11 | Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” I, m. 96...............50 |
| Example 3.15 | Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” II, mm. 88-89........52 |
| Example 3.17 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 2, mm. 1-4.......................................................57 |
| Example 3.18 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 2, mm. 36-37......................................................57 |
| Example 3.19 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 1-2.......................................................58 |
| Example 3.20 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 9-10......................................................59 |
| Example 3.21 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 15-19......................................................59 |
| Example 3.22 | Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 26-27......................................................60 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.23</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 38-39</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.24</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 57-61</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.25</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 35, No. 4, mm. 1-9</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.26</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 35, No. 4, mm. 13-18</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.27</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 35, No. 4, mm. 73-76</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3.28</td>
<td>Tale, Op. 35, No. 4, mm. 87-90</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The music of Russian-born composer Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951) has long been neglected in mainstream performance. He has a devoted following that is increasing, though it is still smaller than his art deserves. Those that take the time to experience the riches of Medtner’s music appreciate his genius and significant contribution to the repertoire. Medtner’s beliefs, work and character are consistent with each other; perhaps the most idealistic of persons, throughout his life he harbored a belief in the holiness of art and the responsibility of the artist to nurture and protect fundamental truths and beauty. Despite personal financial difficulties, a crumbling homeland, and the surging changes in the musical world that forced a kind of archaism on his music, Medtner held fast to his compositional values and never deviated from his clear path.

As a result, Medtner’s writing is personal, sincere, and in a sense biographical. An introspective composer, he was only concerned with the spiritual and internal. As a result his themes are often subtle and the music void of overtly sentimental melodies. He turned to literature and especially poetry for inspiration, a life-long love he inherited from his father. Medtner considered poetry of German and Russian Romantics, especially Goethe and Pushkin, of the highest quality. He wrote over 100 song settings throughout his compositional career. His strong draw toward poetry is apparent in the instrumental compositions as well.
Medtner’s style and the quality of his compositions are remarkably consistent and went through little evolution over his career. His music has a distinct character in a Romantic vein and he maintained the harmonic practices of 19th century Europe and Russia. The most innovative feature of his music is his use of complex and polyrhythms. The overriding character of Medtner’s music might be called “poetic;” it often evokes a specific feeling or idea. The piano became his primary voice for expressing these ideas, as with Chopin, he included it in all his compositions. His output includes 14 piano sonatas and various character pieces in genres varying in length and scope, three concertos, 108 songs, a piano quintet, and various violin works including three sonatas. The largest groups of character pieces include the 19 “Forgotten Melodies” (two of which are sonatas) and the 38 “Fairy Tales,” the latter probably being his most well known contribution to the piano repertoire. The title originally adopted by Medtner for these pieces was “Märchen,” a term used in German Romantic poetry encompassing a variety of dream-like tales.\(^1\) Medtner often makes obvious connections to the source of his inspiration in his works by prefacing pieces with quotes or epigraphs; he also made use of descriptive titles and markings. Occasionally, literary connections are revealed in his letters and sketches.

Medtner clung to Romantic ideals despite inevitable changes in early 20th century compositional trends. Later in life he became increasingly passionate about his views and did not hesitate to voice his opinions (forcefully if he thought it necessary), causing him to become somewhat of an outsider in the artistic world and adding to his musical obscurity in the West. It is beneficial to examine Medtner’s music removed from

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historical context and without historical prejudice so that it can be appreciated for what it really is. Truth and beauty transcend time, and so Medtner truly believed that his aspirations for his lifework would come into fruition over time. The marked sincerity in Medtner’s music shows the affinity he felt with Romantic poetry and its ideals and a clearer understanding of the intrinsic connections the piano music has with poetry will increase appreciation for the listener and pianist alike and further support the performer in conceiving imaginative and effective interpretations of Medtner’s piano music.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A significant feature of Russian musical history is the use of literature in music, especially native folktales and tales of fantasy. It is little wonder that this heritage would have an impact on Medtner, whose music is so intrinsically tied to written forms of art. In order to fully appreciate Medtner’s music it is necessary to understand the sources from which Medtner took inspiration. He grew up in a family that cultivated a great appreciation for literature. The coalition of poetry and music in his work was natural, even inevitable.

It is important to examine the written works and their ideals that influenced Medtner throughout his life. The results will yield valuable insight into his compositional thinking. The purpose of this study is to discover how deeply Medtner’s music was influenced by Romantic poetry and to draw links between poetry and Medtner’s music and philosophy. A careful investigation of this parallelism will prove beneficial and offer a greater understanding and appreciation of Medtner’s compositions, and the potential for better performance through a more informed interpretation.
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Though Medtner has set much poetry to song, this study is limited to the solo piano works. The songs, concerti, violin music, and the piano quintet will not be examined. A selection of solo piano compositions has been chosen to illustrate the influence of poetry in Medtner’s writing. A variety of genres from different periods of his career demonstrate the unity of this characteristic across his output. The discussion is limited to the music’s relationship to poetic verse with some references to Shakespeare’s plays, though Medtner drew inspiration from other sources including novels, folklore, sculpture, and painting.

Valuable sources pertaining to Medtner’s music exist in other languages, mainly Russian and German; however, this study will only draw from English sources or those that have been translated into English. The study is not a guide to interpretation for the performer, but rather an aid to increase informative performances of Medtner’s music and correct long held misconceptions of his compositional style.

RELATED LITERATURE

The compilation of scholarship on the life and works of Nicolas Medtner is spread thinly over the years since his death in 1951. However, a greater interest is evident in the later 1990s and early 21st century, the sum being by no means representative of his deserved recognition. The most comprehensive biographical source is by Barrie Martyn, written in 1995: Nicholas Medtner: His Life and Music. A helpful feature in this book is the annotated list of works appearing chronologically within the biography. The book contains some quotes from letters and conversations that are otherwise not translated into English. There is also some valuable insight concerning the notes and markings that

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Medtner wrote in his manuscripts revealing inspiration for some works. Barrie Martyn is the most notable scholar on Medtner. He is also the author of the New Grove article on Medtner.\(^3\)


A particularly helpful Internet source is www.medtner.org.uk.\(^7\) It includes a bibliography of writings about and by Medtner and also includes a list of his works. This site has downloadable documents including the full text of *The Muse and the Fashion* in PDF format and links to various scores. This site is well maintained and includes information on recitals, recordings and new scholarship on Medtner. Another website is www.medtner.com maintained by the International Medtner Foundation; it is, however, somewhat incomplete and not kept up to date.

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There is no shortage of recordings of Medtner’s music, including a good number by the composer himself. Some notable artists that have championed Medtner’s music include Marc-André Hamelin, Geoffrey Tozer, Hamish Milne, and Boris Berezovsky.

Scores of Medtner’s piano music are available by Dover publications including “Complete Fairy Tales for Solo Piano by Nicolas Medtner” which has a helpful foreword by Hamish Milne, an introduction by Marc-André Hamelin, and a note from the translator, Stanley Appelbaum. Also included in the Dover editions are the “Complete Piano Sonatas by Nicolas Medtner” in two volumes with helpful performance notes by Geoffrey Tozer. The most authoritative and complete edition of Medtner’s music is the Medtner Collected Edition published in 12 volumes by Moscow State Music Publishers in 1959-1963, which is difficult to obtain in the West.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout this study I will examine the selected scores along with the poetry that it relates to, consulting books with poetic analysis on the selected poetry when necessary. I will also examine the English translations of Medtner’s writings, including *The Muse and the Fashion* and other sources on Medtner and his music, such as articles, dissertations, and especially Barrie Martyn’s biography on Medtner. I believe that this research will show significant connections between poetry and Medtner’s solo piano music and demonstrate that poetry is an intrinsic element in his music.

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CHAPTER II

POETRY AND MEDTNER’S PHILOSOPHY AND PERSONALITY

Nicolas Medtner was unbending and consistent in his views on art throughout his life. Why was he, among the best of the composers-pianists of his time, so overshadowed by his contemporaries, namely Rachmaninov and Scriabin? He was faithful to his beliefs to the point of financial discomfort and artistic obscurity, which he most acutely felt towards the end of his life. “Medtner believed that the artist’s role is to create lasting beauty. He held the act of musical creation to be sacred and considered it one of the highest forms of human activity.”

This stoicism towards his art was due to personality traits that can be traced back to his early childhood upbringing.

His inclination toward Romantic language in both music and literature caused him to become increasingly aloof from the musical trends of the time, in common with Rachmaninov, his lifelong friend. A letter to his brother, Alexander, shows some of his frustration with this growing void: “Has it not crossed your mind that I was born too late, that what I write is not in tune with the times?”

Though he believed that the artist’s life was one of solidarity, he could not help but wish for success and affirmation from the public. “Medtner… remained unambiguously certain of his life’s direction and value….

This security in both his ego and genius created enormous hardships later in life, yet at the beginning of his career, Medtner remained heartily unaware that he was, in the poet

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Mikhail Lermontov’s words, ‘a young soul, destined for the world of sorrow and tears.’ ”

BACKGROUND AND EARLY INFLUENCES

The Medtner children were brought up in a comfortable, cultivated home. Their mother, Alexandra Goedicke, was from a musical family and a singer by training; she was responsible for instilling a musical appreciation in her children. She was also proficient in piano and consequently was Nicolas’s first piano teacher. The patriarch of the home, Karl Medtner, was the manager of the Moscow lace factory and a lover of books. He enjoyed poetry, theatre and philosophy and read both German and Russian authors, but he held a special regard for the works of Goethe. Their father’s love of Goethe and Romantic poetry in general encouraged a similar lifelong devotion in the Medtner children, especially Nicolas and Emil.

Along with the influence of his parents, Nicolas found inspiration in his older sibling. Emil was the oldest and Nicolas, the youngest of the five children (a younger, sixth child died at an early age). “…Emil, who possessed perhaps the most remarkable intellect of all the brothers, interested himself in every aspect of art and thought. He was particularly devoted to German culture, Goethe above all, to philosophy in which he was greatly influenced by Nietzsche, and later to psychology; he became both leader of the cult of Wagner in Russian and the guiding spirit of the Moscow symbolist poets. As oldest brother he exercised a profound influence on the formation of Nicolas’s tastes and

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16 Ibid.
attitudes.”17 Nicolas and Emil had a close relationship all their lives, perhaps most thoroughly examined in Ljunggren’s *The Russian Mephisto: A Study of the Life and Works of Emili Medtner*.18 Emil was always understanding of Nicolas and supported his artistic pursuits. In opposition to his parents, Emil supported his youngest brother’s choice to enter the Moscow Conservatory when Nicolas was the age of 12.19 As the brothers grew older, they found in each other a sympathetic companion with to practice philosophical debate and exercise their ideas. Nicolas looked up to Emil all his life. Even when they were apart (Emil eventually immigrated to Switzerland) they kept a correspondence and many of Nicolas’s artistic views and ideas are revealed and even “worked out” in letters to Emil. Emil’s devotion to poetry, and especially Goethe, no doubt had a particular influence on Nicolas. They also collaborated on a book, *Modernismus und Musik* under the penname, “Wolfing” that expresses similar views and aesthetic values to Medtner’s book written 30 years later.20 So similar were the brothers in their likes and dislikes they also fell in love with the same woman, Anna Bratenshi.

The Medtners met the Bratenshi family in 1896; Nicolas was 16 years old.21 A close friendship grew between the families. Karl Medtner, the second eldest brother, married one of the three sisters. Nicolas was especially close to Anna, though he was three years her junior. His mother discouraged the friendship, instead encouraging Emil to court Anna; they eventually were married in 1902.22 During a visit with the couple in the summer of 1903, Nicolas and Anna realized that their friendship was in fact, affection

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22 Ibid., 15.
too great to ignore. Emil, remarkably, understood. Because of parents and social
perception the appearance of marriage continued and it was not annulled until 1914.
Anna and Nicolas were married in 1919 after the death of his mother in 1918.
Regardless of the awkward situation, Nicolas and Emil’s relationship proved durable;
however, Nicolas continued to harbor some guilt for the rest of his life. Anna became a
strong supporter and devoted helper to Nicolas and his artistic pursuits. For better or
worse, she also contributed to his sense of God-given right to fulfill his artistic calling.
After Nicolas’s death, she returned to Moscow to oversee the publication of the Complete
Works Edition in 12 volumes.

CONFIDENCE AND STUBBORNNESS

Medtner was convinced of his musical calling to the point of religious conviction.
No doubt, his birthday being on Christmas Eve (according to the old Russian Julian
calendar) contributed to his unyielding, steadfast beliefs. As Rimm states: “Medtner felt
musically chosen from the earliest years and saw it as his birthright to defend his
immutable conception of art.” In his childhood, Medtner spent much of his time
writing music and upon entering the Conservatory he had an ambitious amount of works
planned. There are a number of unpublished works from his years as a student, some of
which he drew upon for use in later compositions.

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24 Ibid., 106.
25 Ibid., 133.
26 Ibid., 223.
30 Ibid., 125.
Medtner was aware of his musical gifts and he was also greatly encouraged by those closest to him. At home, Medtner was left to develop his ideals in a safe environment without opposition. As Martyn points out, “The consciously intellectual atmosphere in the home undoubtedly developed minds and tastes but, remote as it was from the stark realities of everyday life outside, it no doubt encouraged in the children a certain unworldliness.”\(^\text{32}\) Martyn’s choice of the word “unworldliness” perfectly describes both Medtner’s personality and music.

Like home, time at the Conservatory also facilitated in nurturing his ego. He was allowed to direct his own education (to an extent) as he saw fit and was encouraged by his success as a student. The years before graduation increased his confidence and perhaps also his stubbornness; this would have great impact on his career. This part of his personality would inevitably inhibit him from adapting and coping with normal everyday problems; however, it auspiciously served his art well. As Rimm said, “Medtner was an exceptionally self-disciplined and striving person whose flawed character served art flawlessly.”\(^\text{33}\)

While studying at the Moscow Conservatory his most influential teacher was Vasily Safonov, who was also the piano instructor of Rachmaninov and Scriabin, both whom graduated from the Conservatory the year Medtner entered.\(^\text{34}\) In composition Medtner resisted authority. His counterpoint classes under Sergei Taneyev were cut short when Medtner could not conform to Taneyev’s way of thinking. The offense came when Medtner was seeking advice about resolving a passage and Taneyev suggested moving


the elements about like “furniture in a room”. As a result, Medtner essentially became a self-taught composer like his older colleague, Scriabin. He still occasionally brought his works to Taneyev to look over. Taneyev was impressed with Medtner’s work; he told him, “Until now I thought that it was impossible to become a real composer without having thoroughly learned counterpoint, but now I see from your example that I was mistaken in this.” After Medtner completed his first sonata a few years later, Taneyev commented that Medtner was “born with sonata form,” further illustrating Medtner’s innate understanding of composition.

Medtner was a great pianist, trained and encouraged by Safonov to have a virtuoso performing career. Throughout his studies, Medtner enjoyed success with his performance ability and upon graduation in 1900 he received the “Small Gold Medal;” Safonov, proud of his student’s aptitude, remarked that it would have been a diamond medal if one had existed. Scriabin and Rachmaninov also graduated with gold medals and Rachmaninov received further recognition with a Great Gold Medal for distinction in composition as well as piano.

REAL WORLD AND CHANGE IN CAREER PATH

Medtner’s path as a pianist-composer seemed clear as he became ready to take the professional stage. Until graduation, Medtner experienced few disappointments. His first taste of reality came upon his participation in the 3rd Rubenstein Competition in Vienna in August 1900. Under Safanov’s advice, Medtner focused on his performing and did not

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 26.
enter the composition category. He was flustered by the disorganization of the event and did not feel as though he had played his best (though compliments were many). He was also discouraged by rumors of the competition being rigged. He finished with an honorable mention. “Although he claimed to be glad not to have won a competition in which bad playing might have earned him the prize, Medtner did in fact suffer a severe blow to his pride: the uninterrupted chain of success that until now had made his a charmed existence was broken.”

This experience seems to have prompted a need for change or in fact further convinced Medtner that his true path was in composing. His potential to be a great performing artist was eminent in his circle; it was to everyone’s surprise when he chose composition over a performing career and turned down a European concert tour that Safonov had arranged. Instead, he took a humble teaching position at a girls’ academy for a modest income that allowed him to focus on composing.

Composing was his foremost concern; however, Medtner continued to perform, mainly as a means of introducing his new works to the public. Ultimately, he refused to play any other composer’s music except his own (except on rare occasions and then usually Beethoven’s). His stubbornness in this would result in financial hardship later in life. Rimm called this part of his character a “truly Russian trait,” of “latching onto an idea and stubbornly seeing it through whatever the consequences.” His financial state was often so poor that he and his wife were frequently at the mercy of their friends. Rachmaninov’s generosity saved the Medtners at several acute moments, including

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 14.
buying outright a bad check that Medtner received for his second tour in America.\textsuperscript{45}

Occasionally, Medtner’s closest friends became frustrated with his refusal to face reality. Rachmaninov saw the solution in concertizing; “Let him work like the rest of us.”\textsuperscript{46}

Medtner’s views of his work were almost religious; he believed that composing was his moral responsibility and an artistically “empty” concert career, though financially more stable, would be a compromise. Perhaps, granting some allowance for his recklessness as far as making a living was the fact that Medtner had no children (unlike Rachmaninov) and his wife was a devoted supporter of her husband’s loyalty to his artistic calling.

“A MAN NOT OF THIS WORLD”

Medtner had a passion for his beliefs that made him appear somewhat lofty in conversation, especially whenever music, or art in general, was the topic. He was not able to adapt to his associates. Perhaps only Emil could withstand and equal his brother’s lust for philosophical discourse. Medtner’s high standards for art, and for life in general, were often too high for people to live up to. When talking about his views and beliefs he was “apt to exhaust his listener.”\textsuperscript{47} Alexander Ossovsky, who was a colleague of Medtner’s on the board of the Russian Musical Press, left a description of Medtner: “As a person he was unusually attractive; infinitely modest, quiet, delicate, shy, like a little girl, with a sensitive and lofty soul, he was in truth ‘a man not of this world’, being in no way adapted to practical life. The very simplest things seemed complicated to him, and he would embark on a philosophical analysis of them.”\textsuperscript{48} Michael Salaman’s pen portrait


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 123.


gives a similar description. He talks about Medtner’s gentle spirit, especially when referring to Anna; but when the subject turned to music, and especially when art seemed to be under attack (or if his wife were at all criticized), his whole physique would change into rigid gravity. “Among friends, Medtner reveled in vitality and fun, with a native sense of humor as light and whimsical as his music is profound and serious.”

Though a little lost in trivial matters of everyday life, Medtner was decisive on the topic of art. Politeness was disregarded when his concept of art was opposed. In December of 1910 this part of his character was made publicly known. He was scheduled to perform Beethoven’s 4th Piano Concerto with the renowned conductor Willem Mengelberg. Medtner held the music of Beethoven to highest degree and considered himself Beethoven’s protégé; he greatly admired the Fourth Concerto and wrote cadenzas in anticipation for the impending concerts. However, a dispute on tempi and Mengelberg’s patronizing tone (“Just play, young man, everything will be all right.”) caused the rehearsal to come to a complete halt and resulted in Medtner slamming the lid of the piano and leaving in a rage. The concert’s program had to be changed and Medtner published a letter explaining his insult: “…the conductor from the very beginning took the liberty of adopting a thoroughly improper tone…. my disagreements with him over tempi and the interpretation of Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto generally were considered by the conductor, not as the entirely legitimate manifestation of my

52 Ibid., 79-80.
interpretation, but as the glaring blunders of a schoolboy…”54 He describes how the rehearsal was finished with the soloist and the orchestra playing at completely different tempi.55 Many of his fellow musicians applauded his action.

Another period in Medtner’s life that contributed to his “otherworldliness” was time spent in Khlebnikovo from 1911 to the beginning of 1914.56 Emil, Nicolas and Anna took a house in the quiet of the countryside, outside of Moscow. Medtner found the change beneficial to his work and completed several works by the end of the first year (Op. 23, Op. 24, and Op. 25).57 The house became an idealistic artistic setting, a sort of intellectual haven and it attracted other artists, including pianists Leo Conus, Alexander Goldenweiser, and Scriabin (who came only once).58 A friendship with Marietta Shaginyan led to the meeting of Rachmaninov. Though Marietta urged him to do so, Rachmaninov refused to come to the Medtner circle because he disliked Emil and his views; Emil also disapproved of Rachmaninov’s music.59 The relationship between Medtner and Rachmaninov did not begin to flourish until Emil left Russia. Eventually, the Medtners moved back to Moscow for convenience sake and the days of peaceful work and elevated discussion were at an end. Emil moved to Vienna and shortly after he departed, Russia was at war with Germany. It would be seven years before they would see him again.60

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 80.
57 Ibid., 80-81.
58 Ibid., 93.
59 Ibid., 92.
60 Ibid., 108.
WAR AND EMIGRATION

Medtner was always secure in his path as an artist. In Russia, he had maintained some sense of purpose and success with a devoted following. He was well regarded as a leading Russian figure in the arts and held a professorship at the Moscow Conservatory during the 1909 and 1914 academic years. It was not until he left his homeland that he really began to feel his isolation in a world that was quickly changing in musical tastes. The Medtners were unsympathetic to the Bolshevik Revolution and the changes brought to their beloved Russia forced the couple to seek a new life abroad; Medtner and his wife left their homeland in 1921.61

During the years 1906-09, Nicolas, Emil and Anna had previously stayed in Germany; they had experienced the post-Wagnerian musical scene, mainly works of Reger and Strauss.62 Medtner’s distaste for this music, despite its popularity, did not discourage him from attempting to establish himself in 1921 as an artist in Berlin. Perhaps it was his familiarity with that country and his love of German literature and music that drew him to that part of Europe. He did not seem to realize how much the post-war musical scene had changed. Discouraged by a general disregard for his music, Medtner expressed his disappointment in a letter to Rachmaninov, “…I have felt that I have landed in a world not my own and that I am absolutely unable to make myself go and pester this world in order to secure some kind of patronage.”63 Rachmaninov sympathizes in his reply; “…I see very few real sincere musicians around! It seems you

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63 Ibid., 148.
The little success Medtner found in Germany forced him and Anna to uproot again; they moved to Paris, but they found their musical reception there equally indifferent. Medtner’s passion against the new trends in music was ever growing; at an all Stravinsky concert, Medtner left in disgust at the beginning of The Rite of Spring. And his disgust never softened; the distance between what he held dear and the reality around him was ever growing.

Medtner’s life became one of constant traveling, and searching for a place where he felt relevant. He made two tours of America in his life. The first was in 1924-1925 and the second in 1929-1930, thanks to the help and encouragement of Rachmaninov. He found some support there but not enough to encourage immigration. On his second visit he gave a successful recital at Carnegie Hall, though other concerts on the tour suffered from his refusal to play any music but his own. The tour was generally successful, but times were unstable, and the country was entering the era of the Great Depression. In between the American tours, Medtner made one last visit to his homeland in 1927, which during his absence had become the USSR. In Moscow he was welcomed by an enthusiastic audience and was treated like a national icon. He gave a series of 13 concerts (8 in Moscow) of all his own music (with the exception of Beethoven’s

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67 Ibid., 201-202.
68 Ibid., 199-200.
69 Ibid., 184.
Waldstein sonata) and premiered 8 new opuses.\textsuperscript{71} Little did he know that he would never visit home again; in 1933 he was denied access to the country.\textsuperscript{72}

After visiting and concertizing in England several times and finding there a considerable following, the Medtners’ decided to immigrate to Britain in 1939. Medtner was encouraged by an enthusiastic public and modest success. Rachmaninov in a letter to his wife mentioned the Medtners’ improved situation in England; “How long it will last is difficult to say! You know yourself, the Medtners are difficult children!”\textsuperscript{73}

World War II interrupted musical life and terminated concertizing, lessons, and royalties from his publisher; and so resumed the hard times for Medtner that he knew so well. During the last years of his life, Medtner grew in his passion and disgust against the current musical trends and lamented the fact that his music had not made a greater impression on the wider public. A small consolation in the later part of his life was an unexpected recording project. Due to the patronage of Maharajah of Mysore, a graduate at Oxford and an admirer of Medtner’s music and Western music in general, the composer was able to record a significant amount of his work including the three concerti. The Indian Maharajah was interested in introducing Medtner’s music to a wider public and he also founded the Medtner Society. The project was a welcome distraction to the aging composer whose bitterness was increasing due to the lack of sympathy toward his lifework.

Despite his depression about the state of music, Medtner maintained a glimmer of hope that his music would endure the test of time. In a letter to Rachmaninov, he lamented the nature of humanity to “applaud” the passing fashions, but also insisted that,

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 215.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 222.
“time… decides between the permanent and the artificial, and inevitably preserves the good, the true, and the beautiful.”

POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY

Medtner found truth and beauty in the arts, especially music, painting, sculpture and literature. He saw his work as a spiritual calling and strove to the best of his ability to do his art justice. As a result his music has a most sincere quality, void of sentimentality. Even the most joyous pieces have an underlying seriousness. For Medtner, his artistic and religious views were melded as one and he considered his work a moral responsibility. He found expression of his beliefs in Romantic poetry, both German and Russian. He had an almost obsessive interest in poetry with philosophical questions of artistic purpose. It is possible that the reading of this poetry was the genesis of his ideology.

Medtner’s personality and philosophy can aptly be illustrated by one key poem. The first use of it can be found in an epigraph heading the *Acht Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 1. The first two lines of Lermontov’s “The Angel” appears as an introduction to the set but also proves to relate to his entire career. Medtner quoted the entire poem as a preface to his book relating his aesthetics, over 30 years later (1935).

The Angel

An angel flew along the midnight sky,
And he sang a quiet song;
And the moon, and the stars, and the clouds in a throng
Listened to this holy song.

He sang about the bliss of sinless spirits
Under the covers of heavenly gardens;
He sang about the great God, and his praise
Was not feigned.

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He carried in his embraces a young soul
For the world of sadness and tears;
And the sound of his song in the young soul
Remained – wordless, but alive.

And for a long time it languished in the world,
Full of a wondrous desire;
And the dull songs of earth
Could not replace for it the sounds of the heavens.\textsuperscript{76}

Barrie Martyn writes, “‘The Angel’… provided the basis on which Medtner’s lifelong aesthetic philosophy rested.”\textsuperscript{77} This poem expresses the ideas that Medtner held so dear; an early reading of the poem in his youth may have been influential in forming his ideology. Lermontov’s words became, for Medtner, like a self-fulfilling prophecy as far as the artist’s fate is concerned. He believed that the artist’s fate was one of solidarity and hard work; though, paradoxically, he always seemed to desire recognition, especially towards the end of his life.\textsuperscript{78}

**THE HEAVENLY SONG**

The “heavenly song” (sometimes just the “song”) is a concept on which Medtner based his compositional ideology and which he believed that all composers should strive to emulate. For Medtner, the initial song was the source for truth and beauty. This idea, akin to the “Music of the Spheres,” was the thing that he believed in most ardently. His treatise stating his music aesthetics, *The Muse and the Fashion*,\textsuperscript{79} constantly refers to the “song” that was in the beginning and reminds the artist of his task to always seek it out.

\textsuperscript{76} Michael Wachtel, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.


Medtner was obsessed with this idea, which was “essentially Platonic.”\textsuperscript{80} He believed in music as a pure, self-governing entity (an autonomy) and therefore, the artist’s purpose, for Medtner, was “an attempt, diligently pursued but never fulfilled, to recapture the ‘song’ that was in the beginning.”\textsuperscript{81} Medtner said, “A creator must be a ne’er-do-well to a certain extent.”\textsuperscript{82} This belief contributed to his attitude toward hard work even through periods of little inspiration.

His philosophy emphasizes an “existing song,” therefore his view on composition was one of finding rather than creating, and he thus became a servant to his Muse. Alexander Goldenweiser recalled, “He confessed to me that in composing he felt that he had somehow to set down what already existed somewhere, that he had merely to remove everything that was superfluous and to bring out the real essence of this music in the closest approximation to the ideal form he perceived. Every time this was a difficult and agonizing process for him.”\textsuperscript{83} Perhaps not coincidentally, Medtner’s themes tend to have the quality of familiarity and a natural intuitiveness.

\textbf{THEME AND FORM}

For Medtner, the conception of the theme was the crux of the composition and where composing should begin. He cared little about on the instrument involved the theme was expressed, and utilized the instruments with which he was most familiar. He felt most comfortable composing at the piano where his ideas flowed most freely and the instrument is included in all his compositions. He was also comfortable writing for violin

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
and voice; his brother Alexander was a violinist (Nicolas was also proficient on violin\textsuperscript{84}) and his mother was a singer. When composing the three concerti, orchestrating was a slow, tedious process; he commented in a letter to Emil on the subject:

“Instrumentation comes to me with great difficulty. For me the most valuable thing is the theme itself. But instrumentation is the cult of setting things out, that is, of precisely what has always interested me least of all and for that reason has always been most difficult of all…. I quite often think that, were I not a pianist, I wouldn’t have managed to set down my ideas at all, because I can only do so without thinking about it, in a spontaneous creative outburst, that is, improvisatorially.”\textsuperscript{85}

His aversion to orchestrating and disinterest in instrumentation is connected to an overall defining characteristic of Medtner’s music: lack of color. His primary interest was in the idea, the theme, its expression and development and never sound for itself; the piano provided all the color necessary.\textsuperscript{86} Other characteristics of his music are a natural lyricism and narrative quality, even in works without text.

Theme was a complex term for Medtner; according to his discussion of it in \textit{The Muse and the Fashion}, the theme refers to more than melody, but rather is the basic idea for the entire work. For him, form, and harmony were inseparable components to the theme and his melodies are often “closely intertwined with harmony and rhythm.”\textsuperscript{87} In Medtner’s words, “the most primary, fundamental, supreme ‘sense’ of music – the theme, which is the kernel of form, its principal contents; and development of the theme which is, as it were, the opening up of the kernel, the form of the whole composition.”\textsuperscript{88} He explains further that, “the theme is not always, and not only[,] a melody. It is more than a

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
melody, for – as Bach has proved it in his fugues, and Beethoven in his symphonies – it is capable of turning things into a continuous melody[,] the most complex construction of form.”

He also states, “Form (the construction of a musical work) is harmony.”

Medtner is often praised for his craftsmanship and natural sense of form and organic growth of musical ideas. Form, for him, was as important as the idea itself. Through form the idea could be fully expressed. His greatest influence in musical form was undoubtedly Beethoven, but he also took inspiration from 19th century poets who shared his belief in the importance of form. After making it a point to study poetic form in 1903, he discusses the subject in a letter to Emil and shortly after was confident enough to compose his first set of Goethe songs (in Russian translation), Three Romances, Op. 3.

“…I’ve recently made myself study versification […] and have acquired a certain technique in reading verse generally. Earlier I had lacked this technique to appreciate it, whereas now I see that there is a certain technique here as absolutely indispensable as musical technique is in reading notes. And now, when I opened Goethe, I went off my head with delight. No, truly, take Tyutchev or Fet, for example; although they too are talented, you nevertheless to a certain degree feel that poetic form is a burden to them. There is no originality in their form, only in their ideas and moods. And when you think about it and look into it properly, it turns out that maybe Russians in general have rather little originality in artistic form. For them generally form is always just a burden, a lesson they learned and learned well, if they did so! I am not speaking about Pushkin – reading him I have never had this feeling – with him you feel originality in everything. But of course he is perhaps the only exception (at least as far as an ignoramus like myself is aware). But I absolutely insist on my opinion of men like Tyutchev and Fet, and even such geniuses as Tchaikovsky and Dostoyevsky…. Of course this becomes evident only when you make comparisons. Compare Tchaikovsky with Beethoven, Wagner, Bach, or Mozart, and you will see that he used form really very well in his writing, but … that’s all. ‘He used from in his writing’! How absurd that phrase would sound if applied to Beethoven and Wagner, who themselves were the complete embodiment of form and whose every step is a

90 Ibid., 49.
model, a perfectly distinctly palpable form, and if they break the rules, that itself becomes a rule; that is, if they deviate from form they have already exhausted it is only so as to create a new one. Can this really be said of so-called innovators like Mussorgsky? He deviated from form but did not create a new one. And he deviated because he had already found it a burden beyond his strength. No, you know I have definitely come to the conclusion that Tyutchev’s idea that ‘a thought uttered is a lie’ is itself a lie (if only because it was uttered)! It is bad when an artist loses faith in art, that is, the kind of faith I, for example, only understand a man having in God when he feels Him absolutely distinctly in his heart and does not recognize Him as just some image beyond the clouds. That is how an artist must believe in art….”

Medtner’s criticism of his fellow Russians lessened with time. He later composed 24 song settings of Fet and Tyutchev’s poems, also making several references in the solo piano works. The letter shows how central the idea of form was in his artistic view and also the connection Medtner draws between art and faith.

INSPIRATION AND THE MUSE

Art and faith were inseparable to Medtner. Linked to his faith was his belief in inspiration as a divine gift from above and that inspiration plus hard daily work were the tools of the artist. An inspiration of a theme, in his view, was a glimpse into a heavenly realm that an artist must do his best to capture and interpret. In Medtner’s words:

“The theme is above all an inspiration…. It is acquired and not invented. The intuition of a theme constitutes a command. The fulfillment of this command is the principal task of the artist, and in the fulfillment of this task all the powers of the artist himself take part. The more faithful the artist has remained to the theme that appeared to him by intuition, the more artistic is this fulfillment and the more inspired his work. His whole action and work is justified by an uninterrupted contemplation of the theme.”

“The intuition of a theme is like an unexpected illumination of its image as by a flash of lightning, after which the artist need only recall it, mentally reconstruct its disappearing contours. In remembering certain points may disappear forever.”

92 Ibid., 21.
93 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 48
Medtner made it a practice of his to have a sketchbook close at hand and to write down any sudden inspiration; he preferred to minimize the time elapsed before recall. He often wrote down a theme more than once if it occurred to him again, after being “forgotten” and it was these recurring themes that he was most likely to use later in compositions.\textsuperscript{96} After accumulating an apparently “massive file” of inspired motifs and melodies, he composed three sets of pieces titled “Forgotten Melodies”, Opp. 38-40.\textsuperscript{97}

In his article, Malcolm Boyd points out that the importance of Pushkin’s poem \textit{Muza} in approaching Medtner’s views on art.\textsuperscript{98}

\begin{quote}
She loved me as a child, ah, yes, she loved me ever  
And handed me the pipe and babe that I endeavour  
With childish lips and eager fingers if I can  
To play for her this seven-reeded pipe of Pan.  
And with a gentle smile she listened to me striving  
To play the stately airs from hymns of gods’ deriving,  
And then the peaceful songs the Phrygian shepherds play  
From morn till night on many a sunny summer day  
With diligence I strove to profit by her teaching,  
And then at times the mystic maid at my beseeching  
With toss of golden curls from off her lovely brow  
Herself took up the reed and sought to show me how.  
And as the tones with breath divine I heard her capture  
My heart and soul rejoiced and thrilled with holy rapture.\textsuperscript{99}

Pushkin (English translation  
by Henry S. Drinker)
\end{quote}

Boyd points out a melody that Medtner seemed to associate with the muse and what he believed to be his closes interpretation of a heavenly song.\textsuperscript{100} It appears in several different works including a setting of Pushkin’s poem, “The Muse,” Op. 29, No. 1. In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{96} Barrie Martyn, \textit{Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music} (England: Scholar Press, 1995), 135.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Malcolm Boyd, “Metner and the Muse.” \textit{The Musical Times}, 121, no. 1643 (Jan., 1980): 23.
\end{itemize}
measures 10-14, the melody is aligned with the sixth and seventh lines of the poem, “To play the stately airs from hymns of gods’ deriving, And then the peaceful songs the Phrygian shepherds play…” The melody also appears in the Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27 (which dates from the same period) and the Piano Quintet, Op. posth., both pieces with religious significance. As in the above poem, Medtner viewed the Muse as instructive and insisted that one should not wait ideally for inspiration, but must constantly “from morn to night strive to profit from her teaching.” In his treatise, he talks about inspiration as an essential part of composing, and also stresses the importance of hard work as an inescapable requirement in the artistic process. Heading the second part of The Muse and the Fashion, Medtner quotes another poem about the Muse:

“The Mirror of the Muse” by Goethe

Once the muse in her eagerness followed the brook as it hurried,
Sought at dawn for a calmer spot that would serve her as mirror.
Tossing and tumbling the stream rushed on,
and never was quiet,
Never her image was clear; the goddess turned away in anger.
Then the brook, with scornful derision, called to her, mocking:
“You are afraid, of course, of the truth you would see in my mirror.”
But she already stood at the farthest end of the lake,
Looking with joy at her figure, and fitting the wreath in her brow.

(Translated by Henry S. Drinker)

103 Ibid., 97.
Medtner’s attitude toward the trends in music was truly aligned with Goethe’s poem. In *The Muse and the Fashion*, he gives a rare interpretation of the poem showing his deep concern with timeless art and the importance of withstanding the distraction of what he viewed as passing fads:

“This poem is supremely inspired and at the same time completely accurate in its definition of the relationship of the Muse to Fashion. The Muse, caretaker of the spirit and the everlasting laws of art, adorning her head with a wreath and seeing her reflection in the ruffled waters of a rapid brook, turns away in anger from that distorted mirror. The latter – the mirror of the unceasingly changing idle fashion – is the unsteady, passing, truth of the present day, the surface of our times. The divine image of the muse finds its true reflection only in the distant and calm waters of the deep lake – eternity.”

Medtner’s music certainly bears the stamp of Romantic poetry, but it is apparent from his quotes and discussion of the above selections that the influence runs deeper, to the man himself — his ideas, his outlook on life, the core of his character. Medtner believed some poetry to contain certain truths about the artist’s purpose and about life in general, citing them as “proof” to some of his aesthetic arguments in *The Muse and the Fashion*. Medtner held some of the ideas at a religious level and it is further evidence that his art and religion could not be separated. His reading of poetry imbedded into his character a life-long impression that never waned with the years; on the contrary, it grew in resolution.

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CHAPTER III

POETRY AND WORKS FOR SOLO PIANO

Poetic references are spread throughout Medtner’s music. His works are often headed by direct quotes from poetry in the form of epigraphs revealing the theme or idea of the piece. The first opus bears such quotations; the first and fifth pieces of the Acht Stimmungsbilder both have epigraphs from Lermontov’s poetry (No. 1 from “The Angel” (see page 35) and No. 5, “The blizzard roars and the snow swirls, but breaking through from time to time the distant tolling of a bell rings out; it is the voice of a funeral.”).

Sonaten-Triade, Op. 11 is headed by a portion of Goethe’s Trilogy of Passion and the Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” has the entirety of Tyutchev’s poem, “Of what do you howl about night wind…?” (see page 44). Other direct literary quotes appear in some of the “Fairy Tales;” Op 34, No. 2, has another line from Tyutchev, “When all the things we called our own, are gone from us forever...”; a line from Pushkin’s poem heads Op. 34, No. 4, “There lived a poor knight...” and Op. 35, No. 4 is prefaced by “Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks!” from Shakespeare’s King Lear.

Six of the sonatas have descriptive titles sometimes suggesting a poem, such as Sonata-Reminiscenza, Op. 38, No. 1, which could be connected to Pushkin’s “Remembrance.” Other sonata titles suggest extra-musical inspiration, including Märchen-Sonate, Op. 25, No.1, Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27, Sonata tragica, Op. 39, No. 5.

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Some pieces with generic titles are reminiscent of poetic forms, such as “Elegy” (Op. 59), and “Tragedy Fragment” (Op. 7, Nos. 2 and 3), the latter is a title borrowed from Goethe. The title of Medtner’s “Fairy Tales” is also linked to poetic tradition; Medtner approved this title on the Op. 51 set. Sometimes Medtner’s scores appear with the Russian version of the title, “Skazki.” However, the pieces were originally titled “Märchen,” a term that Medtner borrowed from German Romantic poetry. The term was used to describe stories of fantasy or magic such as Grimm’s Fairy Tales, first published in 1812. However, the literary form also found its way into poetry. The Romantic poets found the Märchen endlessly intriguing and took it up as a variable and free form. In his article, Robert Fife writes, “In the Märchen the Romanticists found the most convenient form for the expression of their ideas and longing…. It was the free play of fancy that drew the Romanticists to this form, the subjective freedom to roam in the domain of unreality and dreams, to destroy and re-create at will a world with its own mythology and nature laws.”

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107 Ibid.
For Medtner, the communication of the idea or emotion was the most important aspect of the composition and imagery was a means to achieve that goal. As he discusses in *The Muse and the Fashion*, “Music is the language of the inexpressible. Inexpressible emotions, as well as inexpressible thoughts… some thoughts are so fiery, and yet elusive as to compel to silence even a great poet[,] “Silentium!... an uttered thought is a lie.”\(^9\) In Rimm’s words, “…in both poetry and music, the best material is often found between the lines.”\(^10\) Just as a painting captures a moment in time, Medtner’s smaller works capture one mood or atmosphere. The title of the first opus, *Stimmungsbilder* (mood pictures) might be applied to much of Medtner’s music as he usually “sought to capture the mood of an impression, typically from a poem or a painting,” that he found particularly moving.\(^11\) The larger works too, though they may move through different moods, are centered on one underlying idea; often the idea is developed to its limit. Imagery is an important component of Medtner’s music, however, it is not an end in itself and does not supersede the principal idea or emotion; it is a necessary effect and a reflection of his source of inspiration. Tyutchev’s poem “Of what do you howl about night wind…” that prefaces the Sonata in E minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind”, conjures images of nature in her fury, but the underlining meaning goes beyond imagery, raising philosophical questions and issues. Medtner saw imagery as a tool for the artist; he is limited to the selection of sound, words, or color to convey his message.\(^12\)

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Medtner did not wish his music to be associated with specific programs. However, some pieces parallel literary works closely and in some cases he may have had a program in mind. In the sketches for the *Sonata-Ballade*, Op. 27, for example, he wrote key lines from a poem by Fet throughout the manuscript score.\(^\text{113}\) He also revealed some of his thoughts about his works in conversation with family and friends or in his letters. Apparently he related to Anna the scenario behind the 3rd Concerto,\(^\text{114}\) which Hamish Milne called “the grandest *Skazka* of all.”\(^\text{115}\)

**ROMANTIC POETRY**

A distinct preference for poetry of the Romantic era is evident in Medtner’s works. Only on rare occasion did he set contemporary poetry (Two Poems, Op. 13, No. 2, “Epitaph,” poem by Bely, and Seven Poems, Op. 28, No. 4, Bryusov’s, “Heavy is the gravestone”). Medtner felt a kinship with the philosophies and concerns of 19th century poets “who grappled with the most profound issues of life, philosophy, and the eternal questions of existence.”\(^\text{116}\) Medtner also shared the Romantic belief in divine inspiration.\(^\text{117}\) Poems that drew Medtner’s attention are typical of the Romantic era, focusing on lofty philosophical issues, including supernatural themes, concern with origin and connections with nature. Some issues seemed to be a preoccupation with Medtner. He makes references to several poems that include an allusive song, which is consistent with his obsession with divine inspiration. Another recurring theme is the artist’s purpose, fate and isolation from society. One of Medtner’s favorite renditions of the

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\(^{114}\) Ibid., 240.

\(^{115}\) Hamish Milne, liner notes to *Medtner, the Complete Skazki*, Hamish Milne, Hyperion A67491/2, CD, 2007.


isolated artist, inspired by Pushkin, is the medieval knight. Medtner also often chose poetry with imagery of wind, storms, or some part of nature exulting its power. In general, his choices seem to avoid larger social issues while focusing on the individual experience. Also, his concern with religion grew stronger throughout his life; religious themes are prevalent in his music, coming to culmination in the Piano Quintet in C major, Op. posth.

Medtner held a special affinity for the poetry of Lermontov. Two of his poems prove to be of special importance to Medtner through his career, “The Angel” and “The Rusalka,” philosophical poems connected by both content and form. Medtner found in them assertion of his aesthetic philosophy. Both have supernatural subjects and make reference to a mystical song. They also share the theme of “lost unity” between two worlds and the unfulfilled yearning for union.\textsuperscript{118}

“PROLOGUE,” OP. 1, No. 1

It is fitting that Medtner’s first published composition should be headed by a poetic epigraph. The \textit{Acht Stimmungsbilder} (1903) has an epigraph baring the first two lines of Lermontov’s “The Angle,” which is perhaps the most influential poem in forming his ideology. It continued to hold importance for Medtner thirty years later when he quoted it in full at the beginning of his treatise, \textit{The Muse and the Fashion}. Apparently, Emil was particularly interested in Lermontov and was profoundly influential in Medtner’s choice of poetry.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} Michael Wachtel, \textit{The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry} (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 89.

Medtner’s debut as a professional composer proved him already a mature artist. Throughout his compositional output his compositions are quite consistent in quality and his style underwent little development. Rachmaninov said: “Only Medtner has from the beginning, published works that it would be hard to equal later in life. He stands alone in this.” Goldenweiser made a similar comment in a review, “Not many composers can boast of such an Opus 1 as Mr. Medtner’s Stimmungsbilder; these are not tentative experiments in composition but the works of a mature and original talent.”

Medtner was a meticulous composer who would only publish when he was thoroughly satisfied. The Stimmungsbilder appeared in print in 1903, though they were completed in his conservatory years. The individual pieces in this set are small (2-5 pages), in ternary form; each piece is distinct in character, containing one musical idea. In many ways this set is a perfect introduction to many of Medtner’s compositional tendencies, including idiomatic writing, contrapuntal textures, and complex polyrhythms. Medtner’s music does not stray outside of 19th century harmonic boundaries; the use of rhythm is the most innovative feature. Though often complex and challenging for the performer, Medtner’s music is innately pianistic, as the Stimmungsbilder characteristically show. Another stylistic trait introduced in Op. 1 is a duality in Medtner’s character; an inclination toward German as shown by the title and the style of the writing and the innate Russianness revealed by the references to Russian poetry. This dualism is apparent throughout his output.

122 Ibid., 16.
123 Ibid., 17.
Medtner designates the first piece in the set as the “Prologue,” described by Barrie Martyn as a prologue to an entire career. It appears with these lines from Lermontov’s poem (See the poem in full on pages 20-21):

An angel flew along the midnight sky,  
And he sang a quiet song;

In Medtner’s music, the angel’s song is portrayed in the half-note melody in the middle voice. The simple melody shows Medtner’s natural gift for lyricism. He later realized that his music matched Lermontov’s words and meter exactly so he set a song version, published in 1909 (Op. 1 (bis)). His choice of E major in this piece has some significance, as it was often associated with “elevated beauty” by some composers, including Chopin. It was probably a conscious choice, since key associations were important to Medtner. The “pure” key of C major, for example, he reserved for pieces with religious significance.

The “Prologue” shows Medtner’s typical use of poetry as he aims to capture the ethereal song of the Angel in a tranquil, nocturnal atmosphere. The melody is a dreamlike song that is superimposed over an atmospheric accompaniment. This piece can be seen as an expression of Medtner’s belief in a heavenly song as hidden to the passive listener; this is reflected in the melody as it is faintly masked by the rhythmically complex accompaniment. The patterns are difficult, yet pianistic (Example, 3.1).

125 Ibid.  

The character and texture of the opening is maintained throughout the piece. A doubling of the melody in the left hand is not rhythmically consistent. In the second phrase this melody becomes more agitated and is emphasized by accents as the angel’s song in the treble continues the same as the first phrase. Perhaps this lower voice represents the mortal song that never achieves the purity of its heavenly model.

Medtner’s use of “The Angel” for his first opus emphasizes the significance the poem’s meaning had for him. It highlights his belief that “the source of all music was a mystical first song – ‘the theme and contents of all musical creation.’ ”  

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occupation with these issues, the companion poem appears to be the inspiration for the first piece in the next set, *Three Fantastic Improvisations*, Op. 2.

The messages in Lermontov’s two poems are consistent with each other. “The Angel” and “The Rusalka” are both connected to the Russian ballad tradition but lacking the narrative quality true to ballad form. Lermontov created a kind of highbred, the “philosophical ballad”, where he severely limits the plot to emphasize an idea.\(^{128}\)

The Rusalka

A rusalka swam along the light-blue river,  
Illuminated by a full moon,  
And it tried to splash to the moon  
The silvery foam of the wave.

And, sounding and circling, the river shook  
The clouds reflected in it.  
And the rusalka sang – and the sound of her words  
Flew to the steep river banks.

And the rusalka sang: “Where I live on the bottom  
The glitter of day plays,  
The golden schools of fish wander,  
There are crystal cities there,

And there on a pillow of bright sand,  
Under the shadow of thick reeds,  
A warrior sleeps, the prey of the jealous wave,  
A warrior of a foreign land sleeps.

In the darkness of the night we love  
To comb the rings of his silken curls,  
And at the midday hour we  
Have kissed more than once the forehead and lips of this comely man.

But to our passionate kisses, I know not why  
He remains cold and mute.  
He sleeps – and resting his head on my breast,  
He neither breaths nor whispers is his sleep! . .”

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Thus said the rusalka above the dark-blue river,
    Full of incomprehensible yearning;
And, noisily rushing, the river shook
    The clouds reflected in it.  

It is likely that Medtner understood the connection between Lermontov’s two poems. “The Rusalka” appears as the title to Op. 2, No. 1, though Lermontov’s poem is not specifically referenced, it was undoubtedly Medtner’s source of inspiration. “The Angel” and “The Rusalka” are thought of as a pair and are complimentary to one another; the angel is masculine and the rusalka is feminine, one is of the air and the other of the water, one is of divine goodness from above and the other of demonic evil from below.  

In Lermontov’s rendition of traditional folklore, the evil aspect of the rusalka is softened; she is represented as a victim of separation between the mortal world and the supernatural.  


“The Rusalka” from *Three Fantastic Improvisations*, Op. 2, was also written during Medtner’s last few years as a student and completed in 1897. Like the angel, the rusalka sings an otherworldly song; however, here the song is actually heard. Lermontov’s use of musical words and repetition schemes is evocative of the rusalka’s song with its hauntingly, incantational quality. Medtner aims to capture her alluring song through a fragmented theme that has a downward pull. The Rusalka’s theme is short and repetitious (Example 3.2).

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130 Ibid., 87.
131 Ibid., 89.

The repeated falling fifth followed by a rising dotted-eighth figure appears in varied settings and different moods. The A section is characterized by arpeggiated and scale passages wonderfully evoking the playful splashing and diving of the water spirit. Though the animated character of the music might imply lightheartedness, it still carries a nervous tension. Four pages into the piece, the Rusalka theme comes into full expression in an extended version (Example 3.3). The mood changes, now having a tender and alluring nature.


The music gradually gains speed, becoming more agitated and resulting in a flourishing downward spiral. The B section (Tranquillo) is contrasting (Example 3.4). The motion of the previous section is temporarily calmed. The lower register chords in the accompaniment give the feeling of depth and stillness, perhaps illustrating the warrior “asleep.” Though the environment portrays a different atmosphere from the A section, there is no new thematic material; the rusalka theme is still dominant. This reflects Lermontov’s poem, as the warrior is only spoken of by the rusalka, he does not have his
own voice. If Lermontov’s narrative was Medtner’s inspiration, the B section might be understood as the rusalka’s account of the warrior in his stationary state.

Example 3.4. “The Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 1, mm. 82-89

Her theme remains dominant, and the music gradually becomes more agitated until accelerating into the “Vivissimo” section. About two pages before the recapitulation, the music plunges into the piano’s lowest register, reminding us of the spirit’s demonic nature (Example 3.5).


The harmony becomes increasingly chromatic and frantic resulting in a characteristic tremolo and an upward flourish. The A section returns in a truncated form and is followed by an Andante coda. The rusalka theme appears in one more version, this time tragic and resolved. Medtner’s depiction of the rusalka accords with Lermontov’s poem;
though she is demonic by nature, she is still a victim in her separation from the human world.

Medtner later used the subject of the water spirit for inspiration of a large set of variations published in 1925, Second Improvisation, Op 47. The work contains titles for each variation, going beyond the rusalka folklore and creating a fantastic world of Medtner’s own.\footnote{Barrie Martyn, \textit{Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music} (England: Scholar Press, 1995), 177.} The theme of the rusalka appears again in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Concerto in E minor, Op. 60, sub-titled “Ballade.” Medtner reveals in a note that it was Lermontov’s poem that inspired the work,\footnote{Ibid., 239.} though his concept of the rusalka subject developed further, becoming somewhat of a religious allegory. For Medtner, the rusalka represented worldly temptations and the fallen hero, the human spirit, eventually awakening and achieving salvation.\footnote{Ibid., 240.}

\textbf{SONATA IN E MINOR, OP. 25, NO. 2, “NIGHT WIND”}

Medtner was also attracted to the poetry of Tyutchev, setting many of his poems to song and making several references in the instrumental works. Tyutchev’s poem, “What do you howl about, night wind…” spoke to Medtner’s fixation on questions of man’s origin and connection to nature. The poem even makes reference to an allusive song. It appears in full as a preface to the Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind.”

Some view the “Night Wind” Sonata as the artistic high point of Medtner’s career. Myaskovsky wrote to Prokofiev, “[Medtner’s] Sonata in E minor is a masterpiece, one of the most substantial and outstanding compositions of the present time.”\footnote{Ibid., 89.} And
“Sorabji… ranked it alongside Busoni’s Fantasia contrappuntistica as one of the greatest piano works ever written.”\(^{138}\) The work has enjoyed popularity in Russia, being programmed by the some of the great performing artists including Feinberg and Horowitz,\(^ {139}\) but in the West its inclusion on recital programs has been rare.

### ON THE ISSUE OF LENGTH

The “Night Wind” Sonata’s obscurity in the West may be due to its great length (over 30 minutes) and profusion of technical demands. Geoffrey Tozer called it “one of the most taxing and challenging sonatas in the piano repertoire, an immense and magnificent epic…. the ultimate challenge to performer and listener alike….\(^ {140}\) In Russia, an appreciation for Medtner is well established; in other parts of the world, reception is not so easily grasped. Learning the “Night Wind” Sonata demands considerable time commitment and the work does not lend itself well to experimentation with audiences. Unlike some of the smaller works, ideas in Medtner’s sonatas are stretched and developed over a long period of time, making the music difficult for the listener to comprehend. Many of Medtner’s large-scale works are better understood upon the second or third listening. The music’s imaginative power is not revealed to the passive listener; however, those who take the time to experience and delve into the riches Medtner’s music holds find they cannot ignore it. As Rimm stated, “an acquired taste is often sweeter than the obvious confections.”\(^ {141}\)

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\(^{139}\) Ibid.


Rachmaninov discussed the question of cuts with Medtner on occasion. They talked of long-windedness and the danger of demanding too much of the listener.\(^{142}\) However, organic musical growth was important to Medtner; his themes had to be worked out as they dictated. “Each sonata is a spiritual organism in which everything is mutually interconnected and grows out of a single kernel, a single problem indicated by the first two themes.”\(^{143}\) Therefore, the trimming down or cutting of Medtner’s sonatas is problematic, since for him, much of the content is determined by what comes before; everything is essential. Marc-André Hamelin was exasperated in response to the suggestion of cutting Medtner’s sonata; “Would you want to cut off a loved one’s limb?”\(^{144}\) Rachmaninov perhaps felt some pressure to perform his friend’s ultimate artistic achievement, which was in fact dedicated to him; he urged Medtner to abridge the “Night Wind” Sonata, later regretting his remarks; “I recalled my conversation with you on the theme of length and the need to cut down, compress, and not to be so long-winded, and I was ashamed!”\(^{145}\) Still, his sensitivity toward criticism won out; he likely feared a negative reaction against a Medtner piece of such monumental scale and he never performed the sonata publicly.

TYUTCHEV’S POEM

The character of the “Night Wind” Sonata is so tied to its inspirational source that Medtner found it necessary to include the entire poem at the beginning of the work.

Norman Gentieu, at the Medtner Society in 1984 described the sonata as, “Very darkly


\(^{145}\) Ibid.
and somberly colored, [the “Night Wind”] is charged from first to last with the intense, infinite, and inhuman sadness of vast, cold, lonely expanse – a true elegiac nature poem.” Though it is not intended as a program for the piece, a greater appreciation for the sonata can be attained with a reading and better understanding of Tyutchev’s poem:

What do you howl about, night wind?  
What do you lament so wildly? . .  
What does your strange voice mean,  
Now mutely, now noisily complaining?  
In a language comprehensible to the heart  
You reiterate incomprehensible torment –  
And you burrow and arouse in the heart  
Sounds that are at times furious! . .

O, do not sing these terrible songs  
About ancient, native chaos!  
How greedily the world of the night soul  
Drinks in its favorite tale!  
It tears itself from the mortal breast,  
It strives to fuse with the infinite! . .  
O, do not rouse storms that have fallen asleep –  
Beneath them chaos stirs! . .

The poem is designated as nature poetry; however, it is hardly descriptive or pictorial of the natural world. Michael Wachtel states, “The distance between nature poetry and landscape painting could hardly be more pronounced than in this poem. There is virtually nothing visual here at all; the development comes about through a series of images, drawing on (and eventually leaving behind) the howling of the night wind.”

Philosophical concerns are raised about man’s link to nature, his mysterious origin and draw toward chaos. From the opening, the poem carries a sense of uncertainty and

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148 Ibid., 119.  
149 Ibid.
urgency,\textsuperscript{150} which is reflected in Medtner’s sonata. The drama increases in the second stanza with the poet’s pleading against impending terror. Similarly, the underlying chaos of the sonata becomes more apparent in the second movement. The drama of this poem was certainly attractive to Medtner, but the images of nature were secondary to the messages it contained. The wind represents a yearning within the poet but also a separate entity: as he speaks to it, the wind’s personification develops over the course of the poem; the howling becomes lamenting, then a voice, a language and finally a song\textsuperscript{151} (– again, a reference to an allusive song). The song is alluring but also terrifying; as Wachtel writes, this song has a narrative that “is nothing less than a cosmology, according to which man yearns to return to his origins in primordial chaos…. The human element, represented by the… ‘world of the night soul,’ recognizes its kinship with this … ‘endless’ or, literally ‘boundlessness’ and seeks to merge with it by breaking forth from its mortal confines.”\textsuperscript{152} The true issues of the poem are read in between the lines, “human impermanence, the imminence of chaos, and the longing for death.”\textsuperscript{153}

In \textit{The Muse and the Fashion}, Medtner quotes Tyutchev while enforcing the traditions of musical form and harmony: “Like poetry, music may at times tell us about chaos. But a song must always remain a song, even when ‘chaos roars underneath it.’ ”\textsuperscript{154} The last line of the poem may have been the most influential on the character of the work, with its ever-threatening undercurrent of chaos bubbling beneath the surface.

\textsuperscript{150} Michael Wachtel, \textit{The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry} (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 118.  
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 119  
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.  
The relentless whirling passages of the “Night Wind” Sonata are inherently image-provoking, but the sonata’s underlining meaning is concentrated on the philosophical issues Tyutchev poses. The subject of man’s oscillation between good and evil was another obsession of Medtner, though he did not necessarily share Tyutchev’s pessimism. Medtner’s religious beliefs allowed for hope beyond earthly struggles, in personal salvation and reconciliation. The fixation that he had on the soul’s struggle between darkness and light is represented in some of his other works including the next sonata, Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27; the manuscript shows that he drew ideas from a poem by Fet about Christ’s temptation in the dessert. In the Eight Poems, Op. 24 (the previous opus to “Night Wind”) he set another of Tyutchev’s poems with similar themes in “Night and Day.” In Op. 37 the song titled “Winter Storm” is a setting of the same poem from the “Night Wind” Sonata.

FORM AND THEME

Medtner’s forms are based in tradition and he had an innate understanding of sonata form. Organic growth was important to him, so the form of each sonata is “new” and individual, dictated by the material set out by the theme. Form, for Medtner, is intrinsically tied to the theme and thematic unity is essential. A favorite technique of his is to bring all the themes together in the coda, showing how they all come from the same basic material. This technique is strongly implemented in the “Night Wind” Sonata. “All thematic material originates from a germinal motive, a minor triad.” This unification of thematic material is a core element of Medtner’s compositional philosophy.

Medtner saw this kind of unity in form as well: “The complexity of the sonata is genetically tied to the simplicity of the song form; the song form is tied to the construction of the period; the period to a phrase; the phrase to the cadence; the cadence to the construction of the mode; the mode to the tonic.”\(^\text{157}\)

Medtner saw Beethoven as a model of form. He speaks of Beethoven in *The Muse and the Fashion*: “The simplicity in Beethoven’s themes and ‘harmonies’… enabled us to perceive without difficulty the endless complexity of his constructions in form…. In the complex continuity of sonata form… melodic lines must acquire greater brevity and simplicity.”\(^\text{158}\) So we see in Medtner’s small forms a greater emphasis on lyricism and shorter motivic themes in the larger forms such as the sonatas and concerti.

The “Night Wind” Sonata is made up of two sonata-allegro movements (though the second is more free) sharing thematic material. The movements are similar in character and are played without pause. The mood of the two movements seems to relate to the two stanzas of Tyutchev’s poem, the first being somewhat stoic and the second gaining in urgency. The work begins with a lengthy introduction that introduces important material. The beginning motive, an outline of a descending E minor harmony, becomes a kind of “motto” that appears at significant structural points throughout the work (Example 3.6). In the manuscript, Medtner wrote three times under the first three triplet figures, “Slu-shay-tye!” (Listen!).\(^\text{159}\)


\(^{158}\) Ibid., 16.


The motto proves to be the basic motive from which all the thematic material develops. The theme of the introduction that follows is characteristically Russian with its dark, and melancholy mood. It represents the basic underlying emotion of the entire sonata. Its ascending melodic line fills the contour introduced in the first measure (Example 3.7).

In measure 17 the theme is already developing; here, an inverted expression of the theme appears (Example 3.8), as Barrie Martyn says, “which, far from an academic device, only adds to its expressive powers.”


The motto appears again to announce the beginning of the sonata proper. The first theme of the exposition is based on the thirds of the motto. The melancholy character has become a little brighter and optimistic (Example 3.9).


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The exposition also introduces the whirling passagework that could be associated with the wind or the undercurrent of chaos. The second theme introduces a slower tempo ("Tranquillo") and a new key (Example 2.10). This theme also outlines the triad.

![Example 3.10. Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” I, mm. 80-83](image)

This theme’s pastoral nature would seem a contradiction to the opening mood of the sonata. It is a problem of contrasting themes that will only be resolved in the final pages of the sonata. The second thematic section quickly picks up speed and enters the “Giocondamente” section with running figures and a “new” theme in the left hand (Example 3.11). A long passage of arpeggios follows in mm. 108-117.

![Example 3.11. Sonata in E Minor, Op. 25, No. 2, “Night Wind,” I, m. 96](image)

The development section, introduced by the motto, presents the themes of the exposition in new combinations and varying settings and tonalities. The Recapitulation is a truncated version of the exposition; the themes appear in turn, but in varied settings. A menacing reiteration of the motto marks the coda. The theme of the introduction returns with its melancholy mood, this time in the key of F minor. A bridge anticipating the theme of the second movement (which is a diminution of the introduction’s theme) ends
the movement with a characteristic flourish and continues to the second movement without pause.

The first movement relates to the first stanza of the Tyutchev’s poem. Like the poem’s beginning, the sonata begins in a dark, uncertain atmosphere. However, much of the movement is built on the optimistic second theme. This brighter mood might relate to the parts of the poem about nature’s allurements and the part of nature that speaks “In a language comprehensible to the heart.” However, Medtner keeps the threats of chaos present with swirling passagework and some chromaticism, reflecting the ending of Tyutchev’s first stanza, “You reiterate incomprehensible torment/ And you burrow and arouse in the heart / Sounds that are at times furious!”

The second movement is colored by an increasing urgency and recalls the second stanza of the poem, “O, do not sing these terrible songs...” This half of the sonata provides no rest for the pianist; it moves relentlessly to the end. Medtner’s marking “molto sfrenatamente” translates “without restraint, wildly.” Martyn calls this movement a “nightmarish frenzy.”[161] The movement begins with two simultaneous renditions of the introduction’s theme, a perpetual-motion figure in the treble and a repeated-note melody in the bass (from the inverted version of the introduction’s theme) (Example 3.12).


The repeated-note theme is extended with an added dotted figure, later appearing in a 4-part canon beginning in measure 27 and ascending by octaves (Example 3.13).


The first theme group of the second movement ends with a return of the introduction’s theme close to its original form in F-sharp minor (Example 3.14).


Following is the movement’s second theme; its triadic outline harkens back to the first movement’s second theme, also in D major (Example 3.15). A chromatic pattern accompanies it in the right hand. This theme appears later in several variant forms.


The development is initiated by another iteration of the introduction’s theme. The development contains different combinations of the already existing themes and motives in different keys. The recapitulation, occurring in measure 250, serves as a coda to the
entire piece. The music gradually becomes wilder until it arrives at a climax nine pages from the end (Example 3.16). In the score Medtner writes, “From here there is a distant prospect.”


There is a slight lull in the frenzy with the quasi cadenza (fermata) while a dominant pedal is held for 16 bars. After this, the introduction’s theme returns (m.295) in c minor and remains the prevailing theme to the end of the piece. The theme appears six times in different keys and in combination with the repeated-note theme and its dotted-rhythm extension. The music becomes increasingly agitated until a final recall of the motto announcing the coda. The introduction’s theme appears one last time in its entirety (mm. 347-351). The second theme of the second movement appears at the marking “Tenebroso” and then again as an accompaniment, paired with the introduction’s theme (m. 413). The chaos gradually subsides as if the storm finally fades into the distance. The anti-climatic ending to such a lengthy sonata may not lend itself well to an unprepared audience, although it is typical of Medtner.

As Medtner reveals in the final pages of the sonata, the seemingly contrasting themes are in fact related. The whole sonata grows from the opening material. The “Night

"Wind" Sonata demonstrates Medtner’s philosophy in organic composition and his belief in a singular underlying emotion.

“FAIRY TALES”

Medtner’s music will probably come to its full recognition through his “Fairy Tales,” a unique genre varied in emotion, character, and humor and more readily comprehended than the sonatas. The tragic melody of Tale in B-flat Minor, Op. 20, No. 1 is one of Medtner’s most instantly gratifying themes. Some of his music most reflecting the Russian folk idiom can also be found in the Tales, as in Op. 8, No. 1 and “Russian Folktale,” Op. 42, No. 1, with their potent melancholy, and the exuberant dance melodies of Op. 51, No. 1. Some pieces are short and song-like such as Op. 26, No. 1, with its simple innocent character and greatly contrasting to such Tales as Op. 8, No. 2, which resembles a substantial sonata movement. Tale in F minor, Op. 26, No. 3, may be Medtner’s most approachable work for the sightreader; it is simple in texture and has a narrative theme. Other Tales demand great virtuosity and durability such as “Campanella,” Op. 20, No. 2 and Op. 35, No. 4. Each Tale is a unique, individual musical experience. Hamish Milne said, “When I survey the wealth of emotion, wit, wisdom, and philosophical integrity in this music, I have the feeling that it will prove to have great durability and continue to delight performers and audiences for many generations.”

The “Fairy Tales” are characterized by their pictorial nature and their imagery allows the listener invention of scenarios or narratives. However, Medtner did not assign any programs to his works; rather he used imagery to evoke a certain feeling, mood, or

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idea. Boris Asafyev remarked: “These are not descriptive tales or tales relating adventures of some kind. These are tales about personal experiences, about the conflicts of a man’s inner life.” Medtner’s interest in folk tales was far from adapting children’s stories; it was another reflection of his obsession with Romantic poetry. Along with Germany, 19th century Russia, known as the “Golden Age,” also had a surge of revival and interest in folklore; they reveled in unpolished sources from the rural and uneducated. Poets of that time took folklore and adapted it for their own philosophical concerns. It is reasonable to conclude that Medtner was interested in folklore as the Romantic poets were, as a highly valuable source for artistic treatment.

TALES OP. 34, NO. 2 AND NO. 4

The four Tales of Op. 34 each have extramusical associations. The first in B minor is titled “The Magic Violin,” No. 3 is prefaced by “Wood Goblin (but kind and plaintive),” and the other two Tales have poet epigraphs. In her dissertation, Ekaterina Chernaya-Oh points out a connection between the Tale in E minor, Op. 34, No. 2 and the “Night Wind” Sonata in the same key and composed five years previously. Both are indebted to the poetry of Tyutchev and also share similar thematic material, including triadic themes and similar patterns in the accompaniments. As the imagery of the “Night Wind” Sonata is evocative of its name, the imagery of the E Minor Tale is reminiscent of water, as influenced by Tyutchev’s poem.

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167 Ibid., 82.
169 Ibid. 44-45.
Peace [Sometimes translated as “Tranquility”]

When all the things we called our own
Are gone from us forever,
And have become as heavy to us
As graveyard monuments,

Then let us go and cast our eyes
There, at the waterside,
There where the streams impetuous rush,
There where the torrent speeds.

In emulation of one another
They rush, the currents run
In answer to a fateful call
That they have heard far off.

In vain it is we follow them;
They will not come again.
But the longer that we go on gazing,
The easier we breathe.

And now the tears gush from our eyes
And through the tears we see
How all, in billowing and rolling,
Is quickly borne away.

The soul falls into heavy sleep,
And has the clear sensation
That an o’erpowering river wave
Is bearing it away.\(^\text{170}\)

Tyutchev’s poem speaks of death as the attainment of peace as life’s burdens are left behind. The rushing water represents the constancy of nature and the inevitable fate we all face. The river of fate is heartless, always rushing forward, and never slowing to look back; it exposes human life as powerless and insignificant. The Tale in E minor evokes the rushing currents with its continuous flowing accompaniment in the left hand. The melody has a mournful, Russian character and a song-like simplicity (Example 3.17).

Example 3.17. Tale, Op. 34, No. 2, mm. 1-4

The two hands are independent from one another and, if executed well, the accompaniment becomes a background to the superimposed melody. The piece has a simple ternary form with a consistent texture throughout. Except for two brief interruptions at cadential points in the outer A sections (mm. 10 and 36), the accompaniment, imitating the lapping water of the river, is continuous (Example 3.18).

Example 3.18. Tale, Op. 34, No. 2, mm. 36-37

The piece ends as the two hands join together in an upward flourish that fade into the distance, illustrating the final lines of Tyutchev’s poem as the river’s wave bears the soul away. The piece is only five pages in length, lasting a little over two minutes. The Tale in E Minor is akin to the genre of the song, for its emotional and dramatic power is so wonderfully contained in economical brevity. Tyutchev’s poem held special significance
for Medtner as he used it again many years later in his final composition, “We lost all that was once our own...” from Eight Songs, Op. 61.

The opening line of Pushkin’s ballad, “There lived a poor knight…” prefaces Op. 34, No. 4, in D minor. The poem is early in Pushkin’s output and difficult to attain in English translation. Medtner was probably attracted to its themes of faithfulness and guardianship of purity; he probably considered himself a guardian of fundamental artistic values. Pushkin’s “There lived a poor knight…” is connected to themes of the artist’s purpose and fate; as with the artist, the knight’s chosen devotion to the Virgin Mary condemns him to a life of seclusion and also renders him “mad” to the world.171 Hamish Milne relates the scenario in the liner notes for the Hamish Milne recording of the Fairy Tales: a poor knight is devoted to the Virgin Mary and rejects all else in religion and the world. In death, instead of being sent to hell for rejecting the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin intercedes for him and he is lifted to heaven.172 Medtner’s music reflects both the chivalrous and devotional themes of Pushkin’s poem. The Tale in D minor begins with a stately theme that reflects the knight’s noble character (Example 3.19).

Example 3.19. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 1-2

A contrasting, fragmented theme appears in measures 10 and 12. It has an angelic quality and the music briefly turns to the key of C major, the key that Medtner associated with religion (Example 3.20).

![Example 3.20. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 9-10](image)

The second theme in F major certainly related to a sung prayer, marked “pietoso, cantabile,” it has a pious and devout quality (Example 3.21).

![Example 3.21. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 15-19](image)

In measure 26 a marking, “irresoluto” is shortly followed by “risoluto” at which point the music becomes increasingly dramatic (Example 3.22). This section could represent the knight’s heroism, which comes to a rising climax in measure 34 but is cut short by a brief silence.
Example 3.22. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 26-27

As the A material returns, Medtner convincingly presents the first and second theme simultaneously, allowing for a truncated recapitulation and also revealing the relationship of the two melodies (Example 3.23).

Example 3.23. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 38-39

The piece ends with a rather lengthy coda (about two and a half pages in length). Medtner almost certainly had a program in mind for this piece based in Pushkin’s poem. In the coda, the scenario of the knight’s entrance into heaven is easily imagined; the music evokes the knight’s rising as he is granted redemption and then a triumphant celebration with resounding bells. At the end, characteristic of Medtner, the piece fades into the distance (Example 3.24). It would have been a natural choice to end the piece climatically; Medtner might have created an audience favorite. Again, we see the characteristic of Medtner’s music to impress a more intimate and subtle experience.
Example 3.24. Tale, Op. 34, No. 4, mm. 57-61

The theme of the medieval knight appears several times in Medtner’s music. Pushkin’s ballad about the knight devoted to the Virgin Mary may have been associated with Medtner’s obsession with chivalry. Along with the knight appearing in “Rusalka,” Op. 2, No. 2 and Op. 34, No. 4 it also is the theme of “The March of the Paladin,” Op. 14, No. 2 and the two-piano work, Knight-Errant, Op. 58, No. 2. Later the knight theme comes into full expression in the Concerto No. 3, Op. 60, when Medtner created his own personal scenario of the knight as the hero who, despite earthly temptations, achieves personal salvation. ¹⁷³

In another Tale baring a literary quotation, Medtner again takes up the theme of wind. The Tale in C-sharp minor, Op. 35, No. 4 is prefaced by a quotation from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Act, III, scene 2: “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!” At the beginning of the scene the demented King is beseeching the storm to rage. The speech contains vivid imagery of the raging storm while also being a lament for mankind and the old king’s frailty as he surrenders to nature’s powers.

*King Lear*, Act III, scene 2 – *Another part of the Heath. Storm continues.*  
*Enter Lear and Fool*

LEAR. Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunder-bolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!  
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once,  
That make ingrateful man! (III, 2, 1-9)

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughter:  
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;  
I never gave you kingdom, call’d you children,  
You owe me no subscription; then let fall  
Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man:—  
But yet I call you servile ministers,  
That have with two pernicious daughters join’d  
Your high-engender’d battles’ gainst a head  
So old and white as this. O! O! ‘t is foul! (III, 2, 14-24)\(^{174}\)

It is little wonder that Medtner was attracted to the drama of King Lear’s speech, which allowed again for the exploration of the theme of wind. This theme was also a common

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trend in in the work of the Symbolist poets of Medtner’s time, a circle in which his brother Emil was prominent. With the marking *Allegro appassionato e tempestoso*, the music is written in Medtner’s most virtuosic vein as it takes on the imagery of a raging storm. A dramatic C-sharp minor chord opens the piece and a four-bars introduction that anticipates the theme (Example 3.25). The rapid movement introduced in the opening continues throughout the nine pages of music. Despite the chaos surrounding it, the melody has a noble, yet tragic character, perhaps relating to the despair of King Lear.

The form of the work is somewhat ambiguous, though it roughly fits into a sonata-form scheme with a primary and secondary theme that recur later and are followed by a coda.

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However, there is a 13 bar transitional section between the themes, which is sequential in nature and contains another theme that proves to be important (Example 3.26).


Following the transitional section, the secondary theme appears in A minor, which is somewhat fragmented. The development section immediately follows. The transitional theme is prominent at the passage marked \textit{tenebroso e minaccioso}, as there is a sudden hush in the fury and a long crescendo begins. At the climax, the A material returns. The recapitulation includes the introduction, this time with the theme appearing in the bass in an augmented form with new accompaniment figuration above it (Example 3.27). In measure 79, the main theme recurs in the same form as the beginning giving the piece a feeling of being structurally grounded. In measure 87, where the transitional section should have appeared, the secondary and transitional themes appear simultaneously showing their connection (Example 3.28).
The closing section that follows further develops the themes including the material from the accompaniment in measures 73-76. At the marking *dolce subito, ma sempre crescendo ed appassionato*, there is a slight lull that leads to the coda, a whirlwind to the
end. Medtner finishes this highly emotional piece with a tremolo that swells and then fades away.

THEMES OF “MADNESS”

It is significant that Medtner’s references to Shakespeare are both centered on “mad” characters. The quote used in Op. 35, No. 4 is from King Lear’s most climatic speech and the point at which his mind is revealed to be unhinged. The other reference in the title of Op. 20, No. 1, “Ophelia’s Song,” is Ophelia’s mad scene in Hamlet, Act IV, scene 5. Mad characters in Shakespeare’s plays, like fools, are the speakers of “truths,” as Marjorie Garber says, quoted in Leonard’s book,

“… madness permits the maddened victim to speak the truth, like a licensed fool, and be disbelieved. A madman or madwoman is a sublime version of a fool – in the confines of the theater. He or she can echo the prevailing madness of the world, speaking through the onstage audience to an audience in the theater asserting, proclaiming, or establishing contestatory and unwelcome ‘truths’ about the human condition.”

Medtner was probably aware of the literary connection that the fool and madman have with truth. The hero of Pushkin’s “There lived a poor knight…” also is a “mad” character in his obsessive devotion to the Virgin Mary. It is evident that Medtner felt somewhat of an affinity with characterizations of fools and madmen, especially late in life. In a letter to the singer Tatiana Makushina, while lamenting the outcome of his career, he wrote, “I have a horrible feeling that this whole story will turn out to be another fairy tale about ‘Ivan the Fool’ who I have already proved myself to be so many times in my life.”

Medtner used the character of Ivan the Fool as the subject of the last “Fairy Tale,” Op.

51, No. 6. In one of Medtner’s public recitals the piece was given a title in the program, “Dance of the Fool.”

CONCLUSIONS

In a discussion of Medtner’s Sonata in G Minor, Op. 22, Stephen Hough made a statement that describes much of Medtner’s music, “…I find it absolutely fascinating and touching in its emotional understatement…. Medtner’s music is always beautifully polished, if difficult, but he never overwrote for the instrument and knew exactly what he was doing.” When one takes the time to explore the music, Medtner’s introspective, personal style is engaging and absorbing. The fact that Medtner was influenced by poetry is not unique in itself; the Russian tradition of connecting literature and music is rich indeed, but Medtner carried this tradition to a new level, a spiritual one, that permeated his art, career, and personal life. Having an understanding of poetry’s influence on his music can increase appreciation, providing a more imaginative and rewarding musical experience. Studying and cultivating the understanding of the philosophical and emotional concerns contained in Medtner’s selections of poetry reflected in his music, might provide vital information for the performer.

Medtner’s unyielding devotion to his aesthetic beliefs was unfailingly beneficial to his art and detrimental to his career. Medtner’s stubborn character was also susceptible to hardships in life. His stubbornness was his greatest obstacle to a distinguished career, especially his refusal to play other composers’ music. Had he concertized, he might have

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achieved wider recognition. As Rachmaninov proved, writing in a Romantic vein in the 20th century did not necessarily lead to obscurity.

The people closest to Medtner facilitated the building of his confidence in his views; he found guidance in Emil, encouragement in Anna, approval in his parents, and kinship in Rachmaninov. Emil was an especially significant, life-long influence. He probably was responsible for bringing Romantic poetry to the center of Medtner’s aesthetics. Medtner considered his brother as his “guiding spirit,” and the intellectual and personal relationship between the brothers is further explored in Ljunggren’s book, *The Russian Mephisto*.

Like Emil, and as Rimm stated, “…Medtner felt an affinity with nineteenth-century Russian [and German] poets, who grappled with the most profound issues of life, philosophy, and the eternal questions of existence.” To Medtner, art was a sacred pursuit and a connection to the divine through its interpretation of nature. The Romantic ideals that he fostered in his youth remained mostly uncontested until he left Russia. When living abroad Medtner could be inadaptable and impractical, leading to financial difficulties only remedied by friends. Had he been able to live out his career in the Russia he loved, his career would have been successful indeed, as proven by his continual popularity in that country. Similarly, had Medtner been born into a generation of Romantics, 100 years earlier, his place in music history probably would have been more secure. However, a wider appreciation is at some point inevitable, for a lifework as well crafted, imaginative, unique, and sincere as Nicolas Medtner’s cannot be overlooked.

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BOOKS


ARTICLES


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**DISSEMINATIONS**


SCORES


INTERNET SOURCES


APPENDIX A:

RECITAL PROGRAM 1

University of South Carolina School of Music

Presents

DENISE CUMMINS RUDELL, piano

in

Doctoral Recital

Friday, September 30, 2011 · 4:30 PM · Recital Hall

Sonata in E Minor Hob. XVI: 47bis                   Joseph Haydn
  Adagio                                               (1732-1809)
  Allegro
  Finale: Tempo di Menuet

Mazurka in B-flat Minor Op. 24 No. 4             Frédéric Chopin
Nocturne in A-flat Major Op. 32 No. 2            (1810-1849)

Six Tales, Op. 51                     Nikolai Medtner
  1. Allegro molto vivace al rigore di tempo e sempre leggierissimo (1880-1951)
  2. Cantabile, tranquillo
  3. Allegretto tranquillo e grazioso

A Little Suite for Christmas A.D. 1979     George Crumb
  1. The Visitation                                (b. 1929)
  2. Berceuse for the Infant Jesu
  3. The Shepherd’s Noel
  4. Adoration of the Magi
  5. Nativity Dance
  6. Canticle of the Holy Nights
  7. Carol of the Bells

Mrs. Rudell is a student of Joseph Rackers. This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Performance.
APPENDIX B:

RECITAL PROGRAM 2

University of South Carolina School of Music

Presents

DENISE CUMMINS RUDELL, piano

in

Doctoral Chamber Recital

Sarah Land, violin
Ryan Knott, cello

Monday, April 23, 2012 · 4:30 PM · Choral Room

Piano Trio No. 39 in G Major, Hob. XV: 25
Andante
Poco Adagio
Finale: Rondo, in the Gypsies’ stile, Presto

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Invierño Porteño (Winter)
\textit{from} Las 4 estaciones portenas

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)
(arr. José Bragato)

Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 49
Molto allegro ed agitato
Andante con moto tranquillo
Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace
Finale: Allegro assai appassionato

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Mrs. Rudell is a student of Joseph Rackers. This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Performance.
APPENDIX C:

RECITAL PROGRAM 3

University of South Carolina School of Music

Presents

DENISE CUMMINS RUDELL, piano

in

Doctoral Recital

Thursday, October 31, 2013 · 4:30 PM · Recital Hall

Sonata in F-sharp Major, “A Therese” Op. 78
Adagio cantabile – Allegro ma non troppo
Allegro vivace

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Catalogue d’oiseaux (Catalog of the Birds), 1er Livre
II. Le Loriot (Golden Oriole)
III. Le Merle Bleu (Blue Rock Thrush)

Oliver Messiaen (1908-1992)

Ophelia’s Song, Op. 14, No. 1

Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)

Dance Tale, Op. 48, No. 1

La Campanella

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Mrs. Rudell is a student of Joseph Rackers. This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Performance.
APPENDIX D:

RECITAL PROGRAM 4

University of South Carolina School of Music

Presents

DENISE CUMMINS RUDELL, piano

in

Doctoral Recital

Wednesday, October 29, 2014 · 4:30 PM · Recital Hall

Partita No. 1, in B-flat Major, BWV 825

I. Prealudium
II. Allemande
III. Corrente
IV. Sarabande
V. Menuet I
VI. Menuet II
VII. Giga

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Catalogue d’oiseaux (Catalogue of the Birds)

1er Livre: I. Le Chocard des Alpes (Alpine Chough)
3e Livre: V. La Chouette Hulotte (Tawny Owl)

Oliver Messiaen (1908-1992)

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Mrs. Rudell is a student of Joseph Rackers. This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Performance.